

Ought, Can, and Presupposition:  
An Experimental Study

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*Abstract*

In this paper, I present the results of an experimental study on intuitions about moral obligation (ought) and ability (can). Many philosophers accept as an axiom the principle known as “Ought Implies Can” (OIC). If the truth of OIC is intuitive, such that it is accepted by many philosophers as an axiom, then we would expect people to judge that agents who are unable to perform an action are not morally obligated to perform that action. The results of my experimental study show that participants were more inclined to judge that an agent ought to perform an action than that the agent can perform the action. Overall, participants said that an agent ought to perform an action even when they said that the agent cannot do it. I discuss the implications of these results for the debate over OIC.

## 1 The Debate

According to the principle known as “Ought Implies Can” (OIC), if a moral agent ought to do something, then she can do it. That is:

- (OIC) If *S* ought to *A*, then *S* can *A*.

Following the literature on OIC, I take the ‘ought’ in OIC to be a moral ought, as opposed to a prudential, epistemic, or aesthetic ought, as in “You ought to help others in need” (also known as “deontic” ought), but not “Little children ought to not suffer” (also known as “optative” ought). The ‘ought’ of OIC is also an all-in or *pro tanto* ought rather than a *prima facie* ought (Vranas 2007). I take the ‘can’ in OIC to be the ‘can’ of specific ability and opportunity, as opposed to general ability and opportunity (Graham 2011). For example, although a kleptomaniac might have the general ability to refrain from stealing, she lacks the specific ability to refrain from stealing when she is in a department store and the goods are right in front of her (Blum 2000). But if the kleptomaniac is on a deserted island, where there is nothing to steal, she does not have the opportunity to steal (Mizrahi 2012a). As for the ‘implies’ in OIC, I think it is the most problematic component of OIC (Mizrahi 2009). The main candidates for the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ are the following:

- Entailment: ‘*S* ought to *A*’ entails ‘*S* can *A*’.<sup>1</sup>
- Presupposition: ‘*S* ought to *A*’ presupposes ‘*S* can *A*’.<sup>2</sup>
- Implicature: ‘*S* ought to *A*’ conversationally implicates ‘*S* can *A*’.<sup>3</sup>

According to Howard-Snyder (2013), the ‘implies’ in OIC is “stronger than conversational implicature, but weaker than the claim that ought implies can is true in an uninteresting, obvious analytic way.” If entailment is too strong and conversational implicature is too weak, then we are left with presupposition as the best candidate for the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. According to this interpretation of OIC, a judgment about moral obligation presupposes that the corresponding judgment about ability is true; otherwise, the former is meaningless.

Many philosophers accept OIC.<sup>4</sup> It was even featured in the news as one of “the greatest philosophical principles” (Baggini 2010). The problem is that OIC “has typically been treated as an axiom” (Howard-Snyder 2013). In other words,

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., Vranas (2007, p. 170). For arguments against entailment as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’, see Sinnott-Armstrong (1988, pp. 116-120) and Mizrahi (2009, pp. 20-23).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Hare (1963, pp. 53-54). For arguments against presupposition as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’, see Sinnott-Armstrong (1988, pp. 120-121) and (Mizrahi 2009, pp. 23-25).

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong (1984, p. 250). For arguments against implicature as the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’, see Mizrahi (2009, pp. 26-29). See also Streumer (2003).

<sup>4</sup>For a defense of OIC, see Howard-Snyder (2006) and Vranas (2007).

many philosophers find OIC to be obviously true, and then use it to do some philosophical work. For example, (Nelkin 2011, p. 5) takes “what has often been taken to be an axiomatic moral principle, namely, the Ought-Implies-Can principle,” and uses it to explain an “intuitively plausible” claim about an asymmetry between blameworthy actions and praiseworthy actions.<sup>5</sup> Even when objections are leveled against it, OIC is usually defended by appealing to its alleged intuitiveness, which is supposed to be elicited from hypothetical cases. For example, Graham (2011) advances what he takes to be counterexamples to OIC, i.e., hypothetical cases in which it seems that an agent ought to *A* even though she does not have the ability and opportunity to *A*. Littlejohn (2012), who does not share Graham’s intuitions about these putative counterexamples to OIC, offers a few hypothetical cases of his own, and argues that non-consequentialists can accommodate Graham’s intuitions about these alleged counterexamples to OIC.

Even what may be charitably construed as an *argument for* OIC depends heavily on intuitions. For example:

I think the most natural justification for acceptance of the [OIC] maxim is that, if it were not valid, then there could be cases in which an agent ought to do *X* but cannot do *X* (and never could do *X*). Thus, given that if an agent ought to do *X*, then he would be blameworthy for not doing *X*, there could be cases in which an agent is blameworthy for not *X*ing and yet he cannot *X*. And this is objectionable—even unfair (Fischer 2003, p. 248).

As I understand it, Fischer finds it objectionable—even unfair—to say that *S* ought to *A* when *S* cannot *A*. Along the same lines, some defenders of OIC find it *meaningless* or *pointless* to say that *S* ought to *A* when *S* cannot *A* (Howard-Snyder 2013). This is, in effect, what the presupposition interpretation of OIC says. That is, if the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ is presupposition, then, when we tell an agent that she ought to *A*, we (implicitly) presuppose that she can *A*; otherwise, it would be *unfair* to tell her that she ought to *A*. Similarly, on the presupposition interpretation of OIC, when we tell an agent that she ought to *A*, we (implicitly) presuppose that she can *A*; otherwise, it would be *meaningless* or *pointless* to tell her that she ought to *A*.

The problem, however, is that there are other philosophers who find it neither unfair nor pointless to make ought-judgments when the corresponding can-judgments are not true. These include Saka (2000), Martin (2009), Mizrahi (2009,

<sup>5</sup>See also Rosen (2004) for an appeal to OIC in the context of a skeptical argument concerning moral responsibility. Cf. Arpaly & Schroeder (2014, pp. 181-184). For an application of OIC in the context of the debate over peer disagreement, see Enoch (2010). Cf. Machuca (2013, pp. 66-89).

2012a), Jay (2013) and King (2014), to name a few of the most recent ones.<sup>6</sup> Given the state of the dialectics, then, it would be useful, I submit, to conduct an empirical investigation that might shed new light on the debate over OIC. In particular, it would be interesting to find out whether non-philosophers are reluctant to make ought-judgments about agents who lack ability. After all, if it is intuitive that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’—in the sense that an ought-judgment presupposes that the corresponding can-judgment is true; otherwise, it seems unfair or pointless to make an ought-judgment—then we should expect competent speakers to deploy these concepts accordingly.

This is precisely what I set out to do in this paper. In what follows, I will report the results of an experimental study designed to test people’s intuitions about moral obligation (ought) and ability (can). After presenting the results of the study, I will discuss their significance for the debate over OIC. I will close with anticipating and replying to objections.

## 2 The Experiment

The experiment was designed to test intuitive judgments about putative cases of moral obligation (ought) and ability (can). To figure out whether or not people’s intuitions align with OIC, I manipulated the following variables:

- Agent: In two of the four vignettes, the agent is a student (Nancy). In the other two vignettes, the agent is a professor (Professor Smith).
- Circumstances: In two of the four vignettes, the agent (either Nancy or Professor Smith) is accidentally locked inside a room before a scheduled appointment. In the other two vignettes, the agent (either Nancy or Professor Smith) simply forgets to show up for a scheduled appointment.

In order to independently manipulate these variables, 93 participants were randomly shown one of four possible different scenarios.<sup>7</sup> The vignettes in which the agent is Nancy read as follows:

On Tuesday morning, Nancy talks with Sid, a fellow student, about meeting for lunch at noon. As it turns out, however, Nancy forgets about her conversation with Sid later that day. After waiting for twenty minutes and realizing that Nancy doesn’t show up, Sid leaves

<sup>6</sup>For another kind of challenge to OIC, see Feis (2014). See also Streumer (2007), Heuer (2010) and Streumer (2010) for a related discussion concerning reasons and ability.

<sup>7</sup>93 participants (51 men, 42 women; ages 19-76) were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were tested online using Qualtrics survey software, and compensated 0.15\$ for approximately five minutes of their time.

the cafeteria without meeting Nancy for lunch.

On Tuesday morning, Nancy talks with Sid, a fellow student, about meeting for lunch at noon. As it turns out, however, Nancy gets locked in her dorm room before she can make it to the cafeteria. After waiting for twenty minutes and realizing that Nancy doesn't show up, Sid leaves the cafeteria without meeting Nancy for lunch.

The vignettes in which the agent is Professor Smith read as follows:

On Tuesday morning, Professor Smith talks with Sid, his student, about meeting during office hours later that day. As it turns out, however, Professor Smith forgets about having office hours that day. After waiting for twenty minutes and realizing that Professor Smith doesn't show up, Sid leaves the office without meeting Professor Smith.

On Tuesday morning, Professor Smith talks with Sid, his student, about meeting during office hours later that day. As it turns out, however, Professor Smith gets locked in his classroom before he is able to make it to his office. After waiting for twenty minutes and realizing that Professor Smith doesn't show up, Sid leaves the office without meeting Professor Smith.

After getting one of these vignettes at random, participants were then asked, on a 5-point Agree/Disagree scale, whether they agree with the following statements (adjusted for the appropriate vignette):

- Nancy/Professor Smith *can* keep her/his lunch/office appointment with Sid.
- Nancy/Professor Smith *ought to* keep her/his lunch/office appointment with Sid.

The data were analyzed using a 2 (agent: Nancy vs. Professor Smith) x 2 (circumstances: forget vs. locked) x 2 (question: can vs. ought) mixed-model ANOVA, with agent and circumstances as between-subjects factors and question as a within-subjects factor. There was a main effect of question,  $F(1, 89) = 174.7, p < .001$ . There was also a main effect of circumstances,  $F(1, 89) = 27.0, p < .001$ , but not of agent,  $F(1, 89) = 3.38, p = .07$ . There was a circumstances by question interaction,  $F(1, 89) = 11.22, p = .001$ , and a circumstances by agent by question interaction,  $F(1, 89) = 5.0, p = .029$ . No other interactions were significant. See Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Accordingly, there was a significant effect such that participants were more inclined to judge that the agent (either Nancy or Professor Smith) *ought to* perform

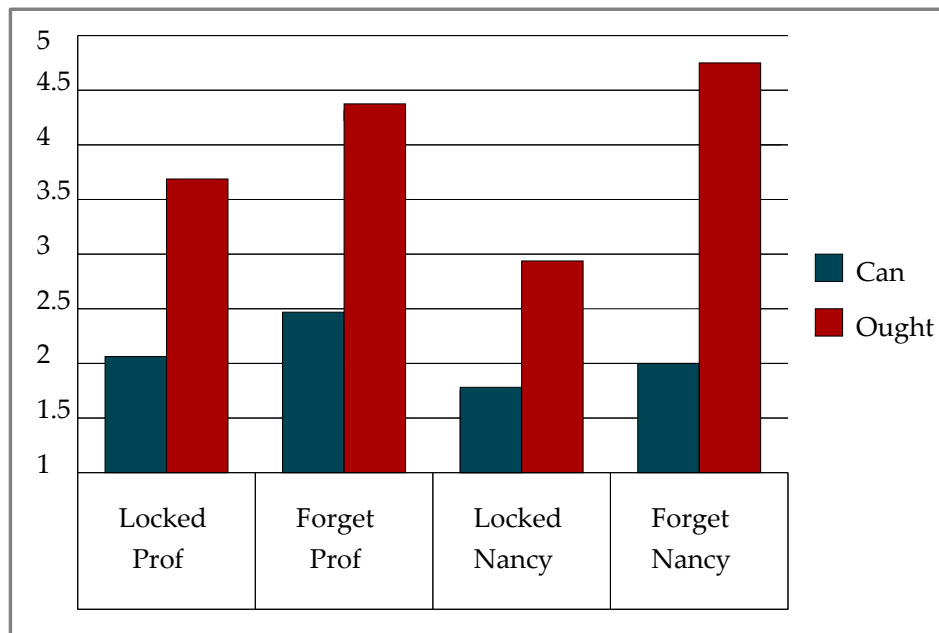


Figure 1: Mean intuitive ought-judgments and can-judgments.

an action (namely, keep an appointment) than they were to judge that the agent (either Nancy or Professor Smith) *can* perform the action. Overall, even when they judged that the agent (either Nancy or Professor Smith) *cannot* perform the action (namely, keep an appointment), participants still judged that the agent *ought* to perform the action.

### 3 The Lesson

What lessons, then, should we draw from these experimental results? The main lesson, I submit, is that it is far from clear what relation, if any, is supposed to hold between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. As we have seen, entailment is said to be too strong and conversational implicature is said to be too weak as candidates for the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ (Howard-Snyder 2013). If this is correct, then presupposition is the best candidate for the relation between ‘ought’ and ‘can’. But the results of my study directly challenge the presupposition interpretation of OIC. Here is why. If ‘*S ought to A*’ *presupposes* ‘*S can A*’, then subjects would find it objectionable, as (Fischer (2003), p. 248) does, or pointless, as (Griffin 1992, p. 123), does, to say that an agent ought to do something when that agent cannot do it. As I have reported above, however, ratings for the *ought* question were significantly higher than ratings for the *can* question. Overall, participants agreed with ought-judgments and disagreed with can-judgments. This suggests that participants did not find it objectionable or pointless to make an ought-judgment

when they themselves said that the corresponding can-judgment does not hold.

To this proponents of OIC might object by claiming that “when agents know that they cannot do what they ought to do, they often ask what they ought to do instead” (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988, p. 113). But this objection does not save OIC from the challenge posed by the aforementioned experimental results. For, according to OIC, if *S* ought to *A*, then *S* can *A*. In other words, the action that *S* ought to perform is supposed to be the *same* action that *S* can perform, not some other action. After all, the principle is “If *S* ought to *A*, then *S* can *A*,” not “If *S* ought to *A*, then *S* can *B*” (Mizrahi 2012a, p. 838).

Whenever this sort of experimental findings about issues of philosophical interest are reported, a by now standard objection is to say that the intuitions of people who are not professional philosophers (“novices”) do not carry much evidential weight. Only the intuitions of professional philosophers (“experts”), it is claimed, should count as evidence in philosophical debates. This is known as the “expertise defense.”<sup>8</sup> The expertise defense is a matter of ongoing debate and this paper is not the place to get into this debate.<sup>9</sup> However, if proponents of OIC were to invoke the expertise defense, they would be appealing to *authority*, specifically the authority of expertise,<sup>10</sup> rather than *intuitiveness*, as grounds for OIC. In effect, then, the argument for OIC would change from an appeal to intuition (roughly, “OIC is intuitive; therefore, OIC”) to an appeal to the authority of expertise (roughly, “The experts say that OIC; therefore, OIC”). Now, I have argued elsewhere that both appeals to intuition and arguments from expert opinion are weak arguments (in the sense that the premises of such arguments do not make their conclusions more likely to be true or probable).<sup>11</sup> But allow me to say why the expertise defense is of no use to proponents of OIC in this particular case.

Even if it is granted that appeals to expert opinion sometimes succeed, according to most theoretical treatments of arguments from the authority of expertise, such arguments are strong only if the following conditions are met:

The first is whether the opinion put forward by the expert falls within his or her field of competence. The second is whether the source cited as an expert is really an expert, as opposed to being a source that was cited on grounds of popularity or celebrity status. The third is the question of how authoritative the expert should be taken to be. The fourth is whether there are other experts who disagree. The fifth is whether the expert’s opinion is consistent with any objective evidence

<sup>8</sup>On the expertise defense, see Rini (2014) and Nado (2014).

<sup>9</sup>On the debate over the expertise defense, see Knobe & Nichols (2008, pp. 3-14), Weinberg et al. (2010), Williamson (2011) and Mizrahi (2015).

<sup>10</sup>On various kinds of appeals to authority, see Mizrahi (2010).

<sup>11</sup>On why appeals to intuition are weak arguments, see Mizrahi (2012b, 2013a, 2014). On why arguments from expert opinion are weak arguments, see Mizrahi (2013b).

that may be available. The sixth is whether the pronouncement made by the expert has been correctly interpreted (Walton 2014, p. 148).

For present purposes, the most important “critical questions,” as (Walton 1997, p. 223),

- Expertise Question: How credible is *E* as an expert source?
- Field Question: Is *E* an expert in the field *F* that *A* is in?
- Consistency Question: Is *A* consistent with what other experts assert?

As I have mentioned above, the expertise defense is a matter of current debate, so it is far from clear how to answer the Expertise Question and the Field Question when it comes to expertise in making intuitive judgments in response to hypothetical cases of philosophical interest. As far as the Field Question is concerned, for instance, who are the relevant experts on OIC: ethicists, meta-ethicists, logicians, metaphysicians? All of the above, perhaps? More importantly, the answer to the Consistency Question is clearly a negative one. As mentioned above, although many professional philosophers accept OIC, other professional philosophers reject it. Given the dialectical circumstances surrounding OIC, then, any argument from expert opinion for OIC would be a weak argument, given that there are professional philosophers who reject it. In other words, since one of the conditions for a strong argument from expert opinion is that there “is agreement among experts in the area of knowledge under consideration” (Salmon 2013, p. 118), but there is no agreement among professional philosophers about OIC, it follows that an argument from expert opinion for OIC is weak. For this reason, invoking the expertise defense, and thus turning the argument for OIC from an appeal to intuition to an appeal to expertise, is a move that fails to reconcile OIC with the experimental results reported above.

## 4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented the results of an experimental study on intuitions about OIC. Many philosophers accept OIC as an axiom. If the truth of OIC is intuitive, such that it is accepted by many philosophers as an axiom, then we would expect people to judge that agents who are unable to perform an action are not morally obligated to perform that action. The results of my experimental study suggest otherwise. They show a significant effect such that participants were more inclined to say that the agent *ought* to perform the action than they were to say that the agent *can* perform the action. Overall, even when they judged that the agent *cannot* perform the action, participants still judged that the agent *ought* to perform the action. I have argued that the main lesson we should draw from these



results is that it is far from clear what relation, if any, is supposed to hold between 'ought' and 'can', given that these results directly challenge the best candidate for a relation between 'ought' and 'can', namely, presupposition.

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